

DCI Briefing for NSC  
The North Vietnamese Position  
21 Jul 70

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                 Council, 21 July 1970, The North Vietnamese Position

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Briefing by

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for the

NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

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DCI BRIEFING FOR  
21 July NSC MEETING

THE NORTH VIETNAMESE POSITION

I. Mr. President, I believe it is clear to us all that during the past four months, events in Cambodia have altered the shape and the scope of the struggle in Indochina. North Vietnam's leaders too have reviewed the situation in detail, and have made some decisions on how to play their hand in the months ahead.

A. First, the overthrow of Prince Sihanouk produced a situation potentially dangerous for the Communist position. It also posed opportunities for what they may have seen as important gains. In either event, the Communists decided that they had to undertake a broader effort in Indochina, involving more hard fighting and heavier commitment of men and resources.

1. They began to step up their activity in Cambodia quite soon after Sihanouk's ouster.

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2. They made this decision with recognition that they would probably stimulate allied reaction,

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- B. Second, the American move certainly threw Hanoi off stride, but it did not alter the basic Communist decision to increase activity in Cambodia.

1. The U.S. action may even have reinforced the North Vietnamese view that the Cambodian situation could either be turned to their advantage, or constitute a serious setback to Communist ambitions.
2. Allied cross-border operations cost the Communists heavily in terms of materiel and disruption of bases and supply lines, but they appear determined to cope with

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these difficulties and to meet broadened commitments in Indochina.

3. In addition, domestic reaction in the United States has doubtless reinforced a conviction in Hanoi that American freedom of action in Indochina is severely circumscribed.

II. We believe that the takeover of South Vietnam remains Hanoi's primary objective, but the recent widening of the struggle will cause the North Vietnamese to apply a greater variety of political and military tactics throughout Indochina.

A. In South Vietnam, for instance, the Communists know they are no match for the allies on purely military terms.

1. They therefore will almost certainly persist in the long-haul, low-profile, cautious tactics they have used for more than a year, emphasizing guerrilla warfare, conservation of assets, and a gradual rebuilding of their clandestine apparatus.
2. They may, however, become more active in the northern provinces, where three additional North Vietnamese regiments have recently moved to the immediate vicinity of the DMZ.

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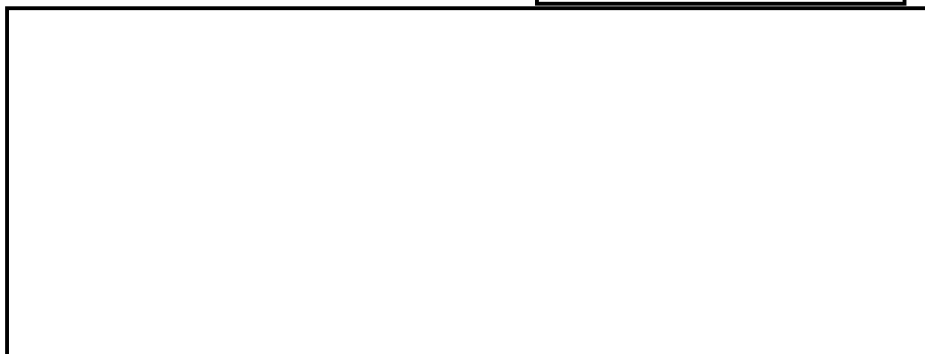
B. In Cambodia, where the Communists have seen a chance to make major gains that could have an impact in both Saigon and Washington, their tactics have been considerably bolder. Hanoi has set its sights on the eventual elimination of Lon Nol, and to this end Communist forces are operating as much as 250 miles from their base areas.

1. The Communists seem interested mainly in sowing confusion in the countryside, but they retain the option of attacking Phnom Penh itself if they decide the effort is worth the political and military costs.
2. For the longer term, they are doing their best to create an indigenous Cambodian insurgency, which does not now exist on any significant scale.

C. In Laos, Hanoi seems to have some new political gambit up its sleeve.

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2. The standard Communist line has been that a bombing halt must precede any talks on Laos, but [redacted] [redacted] may waive this precondition.

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3. We think such a shift might be inspired by Hanoi's desire to maintain the flow of men and materiel on the Ho Chi Minh trail, especially now that allied operations in Cambodia have closed off alternative supply routes.
4. The Communists clearly are worried that more allied pressure may be applied in the Lao pan-handle, including ground operations, and they might reason that if talks were under way or even in prospect they could deter such moves.
5. Moreover, now that the Communists have improved their military position in southern Laos and are threatening further advances, they may feel that they are in a good position to maneuver Souvanna into calling for a U.S. bombing halt in Laos.

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III. The consistent thread in Hanoi's actions is the belief that it has more political staying power than its opponents do, and that if the Communists can persist in the struggle and exploit whatever opportunities come along, they can ultimately prevail. Nothing has come out of Hanoi in recent months to suggest that this conviction has been appreciably shaken.

A. In our view, the North Vietnamese leadership has long been divided on many basic issues, including the tactics to be used in the war at any given time, but all the evidence of the past six months suggests that the leadership has now hammered out a basic consensus.

1. The keynote of the consensus is recognition that the achievement of their objectives could take years of struggle.

B. This mood probably has prevailed since Ho Chi Minh's death last September; it has been readily apparent in Communist actions and pronouncements since the turnabout in Cambodia this spring.

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1. It helps explain why the North Vietnamese were able to commit themselves without much hesitation to the human and material sacrifices their wider war effort in Indochina is sure to require.
2. Hanoi is painfully aware that North Vietnam is plagued with morale and discipline problems, that its economy is woefully backward and ill managed, and that the manpower demands of the war will have deleterious effects for years to come.
3. But the regime has chosen to live with these difficulties and shortcomings and to tighten its belt even further for the struggle ahead.

IV. To turn for a moment to what we know of the situation inside North Vietnam, public morale has not been a major factor in government decisions.

- A. The present leaders lack Ho's ability to inspire the public, but they have more than adequate control and propaganda mechanisms to cope with a populace which has become resigned through long habituation to war and privations.

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- B. Current demands of the war effort and lingering effects of the bombing continue to plague the economy. Only a small part of the industrial bomb damage has been repaired. A traditional shortage of skilled labor is aggravated by wartime manpower needs. Basic foodstuffs, clothing, and other necessities are strictly rationed.
- C. The economy is kept afloat by aid from the Soviet Union and to a lesser degree from Communist China. (We estimate that in 1969 the USSR provided \$250 million in economic aid and \$120 million in military aid; Communist China provided \$105 million in military aid and \$90 million in economic aid.)
  - 1. Postponement of economic progress appears to be a price the North Vietnamese leaders are willing to pay to advance their political objectives in Indochina.
  - 2. Their economic dependence on Russia and China, furthermore, does not appear to

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have limited Hanoi's ability by and large to make its own political and military decisions. The North Vietnamese have complained from time to time that the Sino-Soviet dispute was detracting from the full measure of support they would like from those two countries, but it must also be obvious to them that this same rivalry for leadership of the Communist world makes it difficult if not impossible for either nation to put pressure on Hanoi by reducing aid.

- D. Although North Vietnam has suffered heavy manpower losses, and these are a matter of concern, there is little sign that the military manpower is running short.
1. With more than half a million men in uniform, there is a pool of about 850,000 physically fit men 18 to 35 years old who have not yet seen military service.
  2. In addition, each year about 125,000 physically fit males reach the age of 17.

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V. Against this background, I come to the question of the North Vietnamese attitude toward negotiations with the United States, and here again, Hanoi appears to be guided by the fundamental belief that time is its best ally.

A. To put it simply, the Communists believe that if they wait long enough, the United States eventually will negotiate on terms the Communists find acceptable.

1. They have consistently refused to set the pace in the talks, and they are likely to maintain this passive negotiating posture until they see better prospects of attaining their objectives.
2. In the past, the Vietnamese Communists have negotiated temporary truces with an adversary in order to win a respite, but they are not likely to adopt such a course unless it clearly serves their interests better than simply marking time and scaling down their efforts temporarily.

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3. Till now, they have never felt obliged to consider any agreements which would appear to foreclose the achievement of their objectives.

B. For these and other reasons, we expect little Communist movement for some months on the negotiating front in general, and at the Paris talks in particular.

1. Any negotiations at all, of course, will be difficult to initiate until the North Vietnamese have brought their profit-and-loss sheets for Cambodia into better focus.

2. At some point, talks on Indochina as a whole might have some utility in Hanoi's eyes--perhaps as a device to compensate for the relatively poor Communist position in South Vietnam. They could be rationalized by invoking Sihanouk's prestige and the Communist control of much of Laos and parts of Cambodia.

3. This point, however, has clearly not been reached yet.

VI. In the Paris talks, there are two formidable

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obstacles, from Hanoi's point of view, to beginning substantive negotiations:

A. First, the entire situation in South Vietnam itself is not favorable to the Communists, and it would take major allied concessions to bring about a situation which the Communists could tolerate, much less find attractive.

1. Moreover, the Communists seem to be fairly confident that as U.S. troop withdrawals continue, their prospects can only improve, and that by plugging away with a mix of military, terror, and subversive tactics they can hang on, rebuild, and eventually improve their overall position.

B. A second reason for probable Communist stalling in Paris is that Hanoi appears convinced that the U.S. has no real interest in any negotiated settlement that does not amount to a de facto admission of Communist defeat.

1. More specifically, Hanoi seems to believe that the United States has no intention

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of negotiating about what the Communists consider the fundamental issue of the war: political power in South Vietnam.

VII. Nonetheless, everything we know about how the Communists expect the war to evolve suggests that Hanoi anticipates the eventual negotiation of a political settlement of some sort.

A. Certainly it will avoid breaking off the Paris talks, just as it has kept open other options, including an Indochina conference.

1. The Communists are not likely to be particular about the mechanics of negotiations, as long as the subject matter includes the gut political issues.

B. Thus, in whatever forum the talks might occur, the Communists will not involve themselves very deeply unless they see a reasonable prospect of achieving:

1. A complete withdrawal of U.S. forces over a clearly specified period of time;
2. And even more important, a solid share of political power in South Vietnam, along with strong security guarantees for the Communists and their followers.

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- C. Unless these subjects are explored in private substantive talks with Hanoi's representatives, we probably will not get much more clarification of what the Communists are actually prepared to settle for.
- D. All of these considerations lead us to conclude that Hanoi will be very wary indeed in the reception its representatives in Paris give to Ambassador Bruce.
  - 1. The Ambassador's appointment removes an issue which the Communists have belabored for months. We must wait to see how rapidly they will respond.
  - 2. Their first effort, naturally, will be to probe for any new positions the Ambassador may have brought with him, and their substantive reactions will be governed largely by the prospects for maneuver that they are able to discern in the Ambassador's instructions.

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